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Why U.S. Spying Grows: Patriotism Takes a Back Seat to Special Interests

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The recent flood of spy scandals has many Americans wondering what has happened to the land of the free and the home of the brave.

It seems that almost every week another American appears who has been spying for the Soviet Union. On the surface, each case has its own reason: financial need, love of money, malcontentment or—in the case of William Kampiles, who turned over to the Soviets the detailed workings of our top-secret "Spy in the Sky" satellite—egotism. But none of these reasons explain deep down why more and more Americans seem willing to sell out their country.

While the individual motives of spies will differ, two developments in postwar American attitudes have made the act of spying easier on the conscience. One is the decline in patriotism, and the other is the growing tendency on the part of many to view the United States and the Soviet Union as similar in aims and motives but kept apart by an artificial conflict fostered by hawks, superpatriots and military-industrial complexes.

Patriotism has declined for a variety of reasons. To begin with, it is not instilled in the young with the care that used to be taken. In my schooldays, class began with the pledge of allegiance, the Lord's prayer and "My Country 'Tis of Thee" or "America the Beautiful." No more. In addition, the emphasis in textbooks has changed from a positive view of our heroes and successes to a more skeptical view and a litany of wrongdoings. This restrains jingoism but, for the same reasons, takes its toll on patriotism.

Whether this change in education policy turns out to be wise remains to be seen. During the same period other factors were working to produce what commentators have called "the Balkanization of America"—the tendency for Americans to be split into various interest groups. Indeed, some commentators believe that there is no longer a U.S. citizenry. Instead, they see various groups of people who live within geographical boundaries called the United States but who share few, if any, common values or loyalties.

It is easy to see this in the many specific economic and regional interests competing in Washington for special treatment. With government as big as it is, these stakes are high and a more important part of daily life than the machinations of the Soviet government. Interests split in other ways as well—by age, sex and race. There are blacks, Latinos, homosexuals, feminists, yuppies, the elderly and the so-called white establishment.

It is now commonplace for various interest groups not to identify with the United States and its interests. For example, when U.S. military forces dislodged the Cubans from Grenada, the Congressional Black Caucus accused President Reagan of aggression. The chairman of the Black Caucus, California Rep. Julian C. Dixon (D-Los Angeles), explained the special concern of the Black Caucus this way: "Based on our close ties to the Caribbean, we should have been consulted."

If you are wondering what close ties a Californian has with the Caribbean, you have missed the import of Dixon's statement. The close ties are the color of skin. It is race before country. When Washington Post columnist Carl T. Rowan wrote that "the invasion of Grenada produced a lot of agony of conscience especially for black Americans," he was expressing the conventional parlance that takes it for granted that many of the populations that reside in territorial U.S. boundaries have extranational loyalties. For example, when asked what he had done for America's Latinos, President Jimmy Carter did not bat an eye when he replied that he had given the Panama Canal to Panama.

While interest groups have encroached on the common interest, the perception of the common interest has dimmed. Indeed, in many academic, media and even government policy-making circles disapproval of the United States is as pronounced as disapproval of the Soviet Union. The growing disinclination to differentiate between U.S. and Soviet motives so alarmed Jeane Kirkpatrick, our former ambassador to the United Nations, that she felt compelled to write an article for a leading intellectual magazine insisting that we are morally different from the Soviet Union. That such an article had to be written is itself an indication of the state of confusion in America.

This confusion is rife in universities. Today there are many American scientists who firmly believe that it is their moral duty to refuse to work on weapon systems that would help their country's defense effort. The tenuous allegiance of many professors erupted into the open during the Vietnam War when posters of Ho Chi Minh and Mao Tse-tung were common furnishings in many university offices. Patriotism is still more a liability than an asset on many campuses today. Stanford University recently canceled a course taught by Adm. James B. Stockdale, who was awarded the Medal of Honor for his heroism in Vietnam. Polite reasons were given, but basically the faculty felt that Stockdale was too patriotic to be objective about his own country.

If members of the U.S. House of Representatives, scientists, professors and various celebrities sometimes seem confused about patriotic matters, it is not surprising that some ordinary Americans also get confused. The basic problem is that in the United States we rely on a self-critical posture as our means of achieving domestic reforms and showing our good will to foreigners. Skepticism of one's own society is an effective means of keeping it dynamic and open to change.

However, skepticism does not naturally lead to commitment. As commitment continues to weaken, spies will continue to multiply.

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